



Down the Coast by Square Rigger

A chance meeting results in a job as working crew on a 144-foot square rigged ship from Friday Harbor to San Francisco.

by Rusty Drake

A half-mile away and high above us, rush-hour traffic was crawling, bumper to bumper, across the Golden Gate bridge. Less than a week earlier my days began and ended in traffic jams, too, but I was in a different world now. I was a crewman on a square rigged sailing ship, the *Regina Maris*. The tide was flowing out, and a 25-knot wind blew from directly behind us. With all sails set we made our way slowly down the channel. High in the rigging—a hundred feet above the deck—were two of my shipmates. They had shinnied the last 10 feet up the mast to sit on the royal yardarm and watch with style our entry into San Francisco Bay. We could see a fire boat waiting just under the bridge to greet our ship with plumes of water. It was a time of excitement for everyone on board. We were enjoying a perfect finish to our trip down the coast and we could sense the anticipation of the skipper and his wife, who were sailing into San Francisco for the first time.

I was on board the *Regina Maris* by

the sheerest of chance. Last October 8, my wife and I went to the Seattle Marine Aquarium to attend a lecture on the songs of the humpback whale. When the lecture was over one of the staff walked through, inviting anyone who was interested to tour the decks of the *Regina Maris*, which was moored next to the aquarium at Pier 59. While we were on board we met Dr. George Nichols, the owner and master. He uses the vessel for research. He had brought it to Seattle as a part of the Marine Mammal Conference, and was heading to the east coast through the Panama Canal. During the summer he'd been in Alaska, studying humpback whales and the plankton-rich waters of Glacier Bay and Frederick Sound.

I asked Dr. Nichols questions about the ship and about the experience of sailing on different oceans. The more we talked, the more enthusiastic I got. Quite unexpectedly, in the middle of our conversation, Dr. Nichols offered me a job as working crew on the voyage to San Francisco a week later. The invitation was irresistible. I had a conflict, though. The same week as the trip to San Francisco, my company had scheduled a conference to introduce a new material, and I was expected to be in attendance.

The next day I telephoned the principal speaker at the conference and asked what I would be missing if I went sailing instead. He listened to my problem, and replied that I could get the information from his written material.

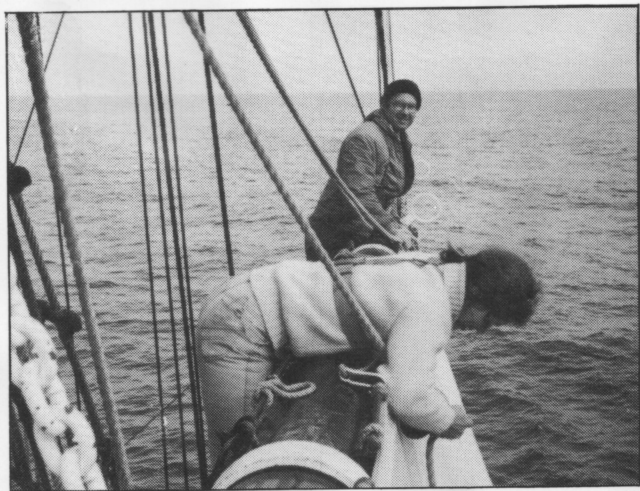
Then he laughed and said, "If I had to choose between listening to me and sailing down the coast, I'd go sailing." My boss wasn't quite as openminded about the trip as the conference speaker, but after an attempt to dissuade me, he let me go. I called Dr. Nichols and told him I was on.

The *Regina Maris* was built in Denmark in 1908. She was rigged as a schooner, and worked the cargo trade in the Baltic Sea until 1957. She has sailed in the Caribbean, around Cape Horn, in Tahiti and in Mexico. In 1965 she was rerigged as a barquentine, with fore and aft sails on the main mast and the mizzen, and square sails on the foremast. She worked as a charter ship from 1965 until 1976, when Dr. Nichols, through the Ocean Research and Education Society, of which he is president, bought her. She is planked with two-inch-thick oak, with two-inch-thick oak ceiling on the inside of her frames. She is 144 feet overall, 103 feet on the water, and her beam is 26 feet. She carries 20 tons of diesel fuel and 10 tons of fresh water. Her engine is a 1965 GMC 8V71, which drives her at six knots in a calm sea.

The *Regina Maris* has 16 sails, totaling 5,200 square feet. The sails are made of heavy canvas, and are controlled by more than a hundred lines that are coiled and hung everywhere aboard the ship. Her foremast is 110 feet tall. She is a

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Opposite page:
The 'Regina Maris' ran on sweat and muscle power when the sails were broken out. Here the deck crew is bracing the squaresails to the wind after hoisting the sails in a 10-knot wind.



Clockwise, from above: The author flashes a big grin from the end of a yardarm; the ship's foremast is a maze of rigging, tackles, yardarms; the ship's common room was headquarters for sleeping, eating, socializing; all sails are set, and if you look carefully you can see two crewmembers standing atop the royal yardarm, hanging onto the mast; the ship's binnacle and wheel were magnificent things, but the wheel took effort in a sea; some of the ship's myriad lines coiled and hung from belaying pins around the mast.



traditional ship, run with muscle and sweat. To sail on her is to experience things that cannot be matched on a modern sailboat, however sophisticated and speedy it might be.

We left Friday Harbor at 8:00 p.m. on Saturday, October 13, 1979. Twenty-four people were aboard, including Dr. Nichols, his wife, Ann, their two infant children, a cook, an engineer, 17 other crewmembers, and me. The Strait of Juan de Fuca was glassy calm, and we powered at six knots all the way to the ocean. It wasn't until we made our turn south that the wind came up—a 10-knot southerly that permitted the jibs, the mainsail and the mizzen to be hoisted to stabilize our rolling. We motorsailed down the coast, a depressing way to begin a sailing adventure. Finally, about noon on October 14, somewhere off the coast of Washington, the wind freshened and swung to the northwest. After so many hours of motoring and enduring diesel

fumes, we crewmembers were ready for some real sailing.

Breaking out the squaresails on a ship like the *Regina Maris* is a complicated and time-consuming job. Usually, it was done at the change of watches, using the people from both watches to handle the amazing number of lines. The first sail to be broken out was the course—1,080 square feet of heavy canvas hung on a tapered yardarm 16 inches in diameter and 54 feet long. When the sail had been furled, it had been hauled up to the yardarm by a series of lines called clewlines and buntlines. Once at the yardarm, the sail had been gathered into a long bundle and rolled onto the top of the yardarm, where it was tied in place with ropes called gaskets. To set the sail, crewmen scrambled aloft in the ratlines and worked their way out the yardarm, their feet sliding along a single footrope, and untied the gaskets. They had to push the sail off the yardarm. At last it was ready to be pulled open.

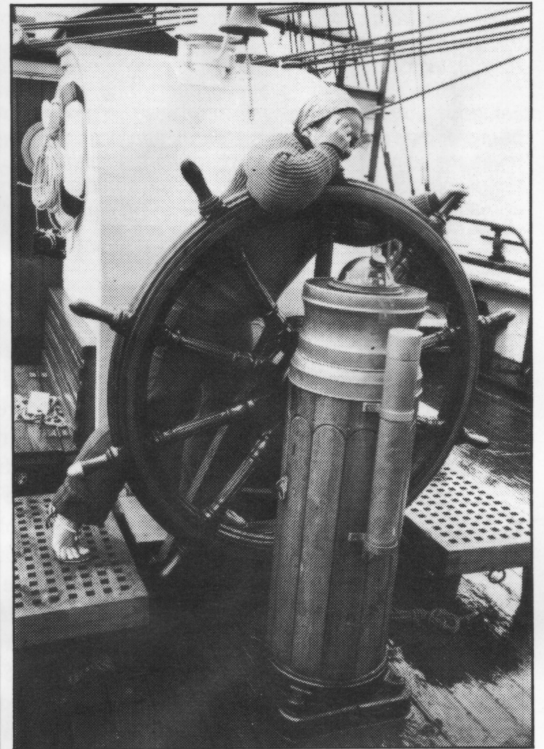
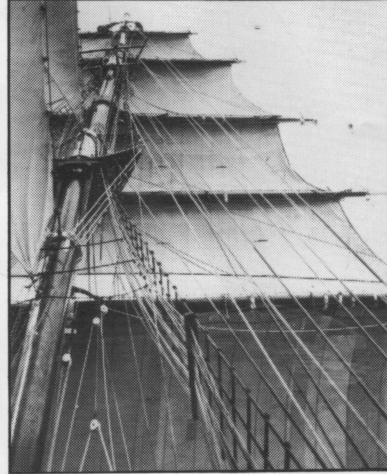
Four men on deck pulled on lines attached to the corners of the course, and two others stood by the buntlines and

the clewlines to make sure they ran free as the sail was unfurled.

When the course was set, we left our lines in heaps and moved to pull out the sails above—the lower topsail, the upper topsail, the topgallant, and the royal. We set the top three sails by hoisting their yardarms up the mast, and this required the combined strength of the two watches on deck. It took ten people on the yardarm halyards to make the hoists. We lined up shoulder to shoulder along the deck, grabbed the hairy, one-inch-thick rope, and at a command all heaved together. The man at the end held the line taut while we grabbed another 24 inches and heaved again. With each heave the yardarm crept up the mast.

Not everyone pulling on the halyard was experienced. Young Jonathan Watt had come on the ship at Friday Harbor straight from his father's farm in Oregon. He wore tall rubber boots, and they still had manure on them. Jonathan was second in line, right behind James Puff, one of the biggest men on the ship.

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The dolphins were most beautiful in darkness. When they were at the surface they were revealed by streamers of phosphorescent light—kites with long silver tails.

Puff, as lead man, had to tie off the halyard once the yardarm was hoisted. He had to tie it off quickly. The yardarm with its sail attached was heavy, and once released, it would reclaim the line we so laboriously had drawn down. When the yardarm got to the top of its hoist, Puff coordinated the action of the 10 people on the halyard. At the command, "Up behind," everyone was to let go so he could belay the halyard to the rail.

"Ready on the line!" Puff bellowed.

"Ready!" we answered in unison.

"Up behind!" Puff snatched the halyard and belayed it in a twinkling. When he yelled, I dropped the rope like a hot iron. So did everyone else—except Jonathan Watt. Somehow, Jonathan forgot the sequence and hung on. Puff's mighty heave pulled Jonathan off his feet and sent him sprawling on the deck.

Despite miscues and on-the-spot training sessions, we got the sails up and trimmed to the wind. The *Regina Maris* moved through the water at a peaceful three knots, half as fast as we had gone under power, but twice as pleasant.

Early in the afternoon off the Washington coast the dolphins joined us. *En masse*, they charged toward the ship, bounding in across the waves. For 200 yards on both sides we saw the dolphins break completely out of the water, as if to take a look at the ship with its clouds of sail. When they reached us they changed character. They ceased their leaping and swam to the bow of the ship. A pressure wave must have existed in front of the bow. The dolphins rode this invisible wave like children sledding down a hill. They began their ride about four feet in front of the bow, and, without kicking their tails, accelerated forward, away from the ship. When they had gone 15 or 20 feet, they surfaced, blew, doubled back and repeated their ride. Sometimes the dolphins went sledding individually; sometimes formations of them—six to ten abreast—sporting in front of the ship, surfacing together, blowing together, and doubling back together.

One day, I climbed out the cables that

supported the bowsprit and watched for hours as the dolphins played. One of the dolphins glided directly toward me. When he was immediately below, he rolled gracefully onto his side and we exchanged glances, eye-to-eye. Then he rolled back onto his stomach, gave a kick and was gone.

The dolphins were most beautiful at night. Because of the darkness, a person was not always aware of their presence, but then the shout of their quick breath gave them away. Some of my most peaceful moments were spent late at night in the bows of the ship. Leaning against the rail, I could hear the water as it broke against the stem piece and flowed back along the sides of the hull. The bow rose and fell to the swells, and beneath the bow, dolphins played in the phosphorescence. When they were at the surface they were revealed by streamers of phosphorescent light—kites with long silver tails. Dolphins were with us all the way to San Francisco.

D r. Nichols has prepared a brochure about the ship, and in it he described the *Regina Maris* as well-found and seaworthy, capable of accommodating 37 austerely. As the trip progressed, we came to know more fully the meaning of the word austere. The main living area for the crew was the common room, in the center of the ship. The common room was seven feet high, 23 feet long, and 20 feet wide. Varnished tables ran down its length, with benches on each side for seating. Overhead, between the deck beams, were hand rails for use in rough weather.

The sides of the room were lined two high with sleeping berths, and faced with varnished wood. The berths were seven feet long and 24 inches wide. They were equipped with reading lights and four-inch-thick foam mats. A well between the berth and the side of the hull held personal belongings. The berths had faded red-and-white-striped curtains for privacy, and the atmosphere of the common room was of warmth. Meals were taken in the common room, normally on the port side. To get breakfast, some of the crew simply rolled out of

their berths and they were seated.

Because of the watch system, I sometimes took naps in the middle of the day. Nothing is as pleasant as a nap at sea. The sounds of the water and the motion of the ship soon lull a person to sleep. The *Regina Maris* was a symphony of sounds. She rolled as she sailed, and the changing pressures on her wooden hull and deck set up a concert of creaking and straining wood. We all know the noise of a loose board in a wooden floor. Imagine a hundred loose boards, and a hundred people stepping on them, each board with a different pitch and frequency and volume, and have the people step not only in unison, but in a progression, that flows the creaking back and forth across the room. That is the sound of a wooden ship sailing in the ocean when you lie down for a nap in the afternoon. The creaking was discomforting at first, as if the ship were breaking up. After a few days it became natural and soothing.

Our cook, Emile Amerotico, had cooked on merchant ships, tug boats, and most recently, at Bryn Mawr College. We were constantly and pleasantly surprised by what came out of Emile's cramped and greasy galley. Dinners consisted of spaghetti with fresh San Francisco sourdough bread, ham with raisin sauce, stuffed port chops, egg plant lasagne, half a baked chicken (apiece), baked cod, roast beef with a light and fluffy Yorkshire pudding. We had fresh vegetables, crisp salads, fresh fruit in homemade yogurt, and excellent desserts. Mornings brought souffles, pear muffins, cantaloupe, and whole wheat french toast. One night we had chili. Emile had found a bag of dried Mexican chili peppers. He cut a slice off one of the peppers and popped it in his mouth. It was mild. He was happily slicing chili peppers and dropping them into the pot when one of the other crewmembers came by and told him they got very hot as they cooked. Emile stopped at that point but it was too late. Four peppers already were sliced and in the chili. That night dinner was a bite of chile, a bite of cole slaw, a bite of chile, a bite of cole slaw. It was Emile's only failure.

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Working aloft, crewmembers stood on footropes made of cable.

The first morning out, I woke to what I thought was the sound of water rushing by the side of the ship, as if we were moving very fast through the ocean. As I became fully awake, however, I realized I was hearing the sound of bilge water rushing back and forth across the bottom of the hull. I also became aware of a strong smell—diesel oil mixed with stale bilge water. The smell was overpowering. I was in a lower berth and the fumes filled the space, trapped there by the closed curtain. Each time the ship rolled, water surged across the bottom and drove a charge of foul air into my berth. My stomach began urgently telling me that it was time to get on deck for fresh air.

I struggled to dress in the cramped and unfamiliar area, while each breath brought me closer to disaster. Once dressed, I searched for the motion sickness pills in the storage bin beside my berth, the space through which the foul air was surging. Closer and closer my stomach came to sharing its contents

with the world. I found the pills at last and dashed to the deck and its clear and stable horizons. When I got there I saw that several of my watch mates (who, as I, had lower berths) suffered the same symptoms, but they had lost the war.

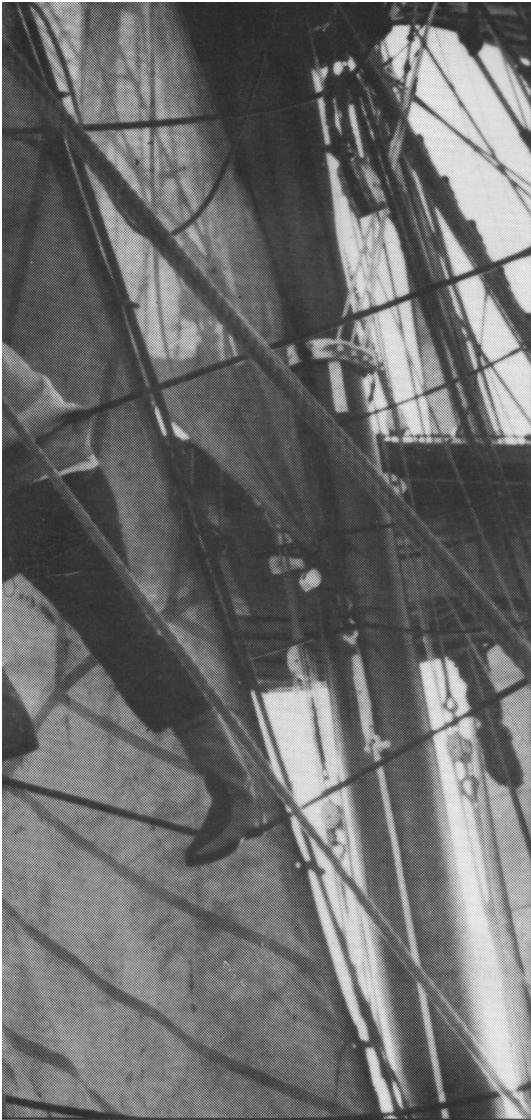
Thereafter, I slept with my head against the side with the curtain, where the air was reasonably fresh. I told my watch mates that I timed my breathing cycle with the pulse of the bilges. When the roll forced the awful diesel air into my berth, I exhaled. When the ship rolled back, I inhaled. I gave my watch mates instructions on how to breathe that way, but they didn't believe me.

On land, my life was regulated by the sun. I worked in the daytime and slept at night. At sea, life was controlled by the clock and the regimentation of the watch system. We worked four hours on and eight hours off, except for two two-hour dog-watches between 4:00 and 8:00 at night, which kept us from spending the same hours each day on duty. Breakfast was

at 7:00, lunch was at noon, and dinner was at 4:00.

We had a working crew of 18, divided into three watches of six people each. The skipper, his wife, their two children, the cook and the engineer didn't stand watches. We were given specific responsibilities in case of a man overboard or an abandonment of ship. While actually on watch, we had two main duties—searching the horizon for ships, and steering. A watch might begin with an hour of waiting, followed by an hour of bow watch, an hour of steering, and a final hour of idleness. Once the sails were up we didn't fuss with them, and major changes were accomplished at the watch change when 12 people were on deck.

The bow watch was important to the safety of the ship. We sailed 40 miles off the coast in the shipping lanes, and usually passed several ships during the night. A ship would appear as a light on the horizon, and then it would vanish. It would appear again for a little longer, then vanish once more. As soon as the light was confirmed as a ship and not a



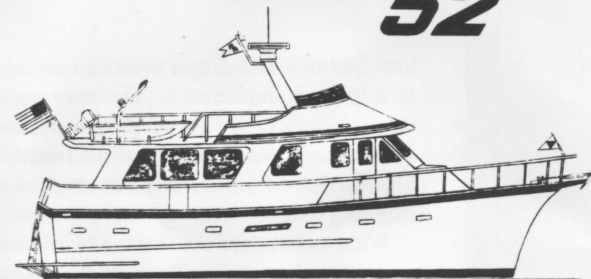
hallucination, the bow watch reported the sighting to the watch captain. He would come quickly forward and determine the ship's course, based on the relationship of its bow light and range light. In almost every case the ships that appeared passed about a half-mile away, either to port or to starboard.

On clear nights, late watch duty was almost a pleasure. The space above us was filled with tall spars and stars, and all around was the sound of the passing sea. It was a great time for philosophical discussions with a watch mate. One of the most interesting people on my watch was a young woman named Mary Crowley. She has sailed nearly all her life. When she was 21, she shipped out on a 320-foot-long three-masted square rigged Norwegian training ship as the on-board English teacher. They spent nine months at sea. She so loves the sea and the sailing experience that she has started a business called Ocean Voyages, based in Sausalito, California, that coordinates ocean sailing trips all over the world.

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A moment of triumph: Dr. George Nichols prepares to take a photo of his wife, Ann, as the 'Regina Maris' passes under the Golden Gate bridge.

During our first days at sea, many of the crew became reclusive. They disappeared when they weren't on watch. Almost all of them were readers, and I'd find them in different parts of the ship with books in their hands, away in their own worlds. We ate and slept and did most of our socializing in a large room, called the common room, but it wasn't unusual to walk through the common room and not see anyone, even though 12 people were off watch at all times.

This chance to have privacy was in marked contrast to conditions on board when the ship carries its maximum crew of 37. I talked with a young woman on the trip who had sailed aboard the *Regina Maris* with a full crew in Tahiti some years earlier. She told me that privacy had been impossible. Once, trying to escape the crowding, she carried a book to the highest point on the foremast, where she could read in solitude. Someone followed all the way up the mast to talk with her.

Not everyone on board withdrew, however. One of the crewmembers, Walt Ratcliff, had flown to Friday Harbor from Gualala, California, where he owns several hundred acres of redwood forest. Walt has the kind of face that is permanently wrinkled from constant smiling. For years he has sailed on San Francisco Bay, and he proudly wore a green sweatshirt with the inscription, "Bullship '78" on the front—a memento of the annual El Toro race across the

As a sea lifted the stern, I could see over all the obstructions. The bowsprit, a hundred feet ahead, became the world's largest compass needle.

bay. He has sailed that race something like 20 times, including a year when high winds reduced the fleet of 100 starters to 12 finishers. Walt was one of the twelve. He was full of yarns, and I spent hours listening to him.

Walt was aboard the *Regina Maris* for a very special reason. Two years earlier, he and Dr. Nichols had tramped through his woods, looking for perfect trees to make into new spars for the ship. They selected two. The trees were felled and treated, and were waiting for us on a beach at Anchor Bay, in northern California. We radioed ahead to learn the surf conditions at Anchor Bay, and were told that the surf was too high to get the new spars off the beach. Walt was greatly disappointed, as were the residents of Anchor Bay. Some of the old timers had waited for days for the square rigger to sail in and take on cargo, a sight that hadn't been witnessed there in decades.

Our third day at sea I came on watch at noon. We were running before a 25-knot northwesterly wind. The sky had gone deep blue and we were surrounded by the even darker blue of the ocean. All around, foaming whitecaps marked the tops of seas—seas which had built considerably in only a few hours. We were up to seven knots—virtually the ship's top speed—and the pressure of the wind against the fully set sails greatly stabilized the roll. For the first time in the trip the ship became truly a creature of the sea.

The watch rotation put me on the wheel first. It was a magnificent ship's wheel, made of mahogany, varnished to a rich luster, and nearly five feet across. It had ten spokes, each of them carefully turned on a lathe. The outer spokes fit a hand comfortably and stood about six inches out from the rim. The head pin, which designated a centered rudder when it pointed straight up, was capped with brass that gleamed from the endless polishing of working hands. We steered from behind and to the side, standing next to the wheel's supports and cable drum. A tall binnacle with a compass was immediately in front of the wheel.

The compass was the only positive reference for the helmsman. The view ahead was blocked by the mainmast, a lifeboat, and a deck house that stood nine feet high. It took concentration and strength to steer the ship in 25 knot winds. When I came on watch, I was given a compass course to steer, and was expected to hold that course within plus or minus five degrees. I couldn't do it. Often, I found myself as much as 15 degrees off the correct course. I was always a step behind. A swell would pass and I would see the compass start swinging to the east. I would turn the wheel four spokes to the west and nothing would happen. I would add two more spokes to the west. The compass card would stop its swing, pause, then move to the west. At once, I would spin the wheel back six spokes to center, then subtract two spokes, to counter the ship's tendency to keep going past center. It seldom worked. I spent my entire hour on the wheel trying to figure out what the ship was up to next.

The problem was compounded by the lack of a good reference between the ship and the horizon, so I couldn't tell when we began to move subtly in a new direction. By the time the swing was revealed on the compass card a major correction was required on the helm.

There were two days, however, when I really got control of the ship. Both times a heavy sea was running. As it lifted the stern, I could see over all the obstructions and find a solid reference on the horizon. The bowsprit, a hundred feet in front of me, became the world's largest compass needle. With it to guide me, I could detect the very beginnings of each deviation, and make the small adjustments to compensate.

It is said there are no free lunches. That was true in this case. The ship no longer could play with me, but the big swells harrassed me instead. As a swell passed under the counter, the water pressure became enormous against the rudder. I had to brace myself with all my strength against the wheel just to hold it in place. I had to be very careful not to let go as I turned, because the wheel would snap back with enough force to break an arm.

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Just after I took the helm in the big seas, I felt the ship turn and I began to correct the swing by turning the wheel. With great difficulty I got seven spokes. Then the wheel locked up. I asked one of the professional crewmembers how many turns the wheel had before I reached full rudder. He said two and one-half to each side. I realized that it was not the rudder mechanism that had stopped me, but the power of the waves. It was a battle I could not win, so I resigned myself to making course changes between swells.

The *Regina Maris* is a traditional ocean vessel, driven in a manner dating back through history. As I worked aboard the ship, I sensed that I was sharing experiences with lost generations of seamen. The feeling was most pronounced when I climbed high into the rigging.

Standing at the end of a yardarm filled me with a mixture of emotions. The most dramatic was the sense of extreme height. The water was 80 feet below, with nothing but air between me and the ocean. The feeling was heightened (if the pun may be excused) by the meager supports that connected me with the ship. I held on to a jackstay—an iron rail about $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch thick—that ran along the top of the yardarm. My feet were on a steel cable footrope that draped beneath the yardarm and was supported in places by stirrups that hung down from the jackstay. The footrope swung beneath the yardarm, and it was necessary to lean forward against the yardarm to keep my balance. We had to call out whenever we stepped onto or off of the footrope, so that crewmen already on it wouldn't be launched into space by the footrope's sudden tightening or loosening. Some footropes were slung closer than others to the yardarms. One of them was so close that I had to bend my knees sharply so I could keep my hips against the yardarm. It is unnerving to work with both hands free, leaning forward against a yardarm 60 or 80 feet in the air, trying to keep my knees bent, while pressing my feet down and backwards against the

footrope to keep it behind me.

If the yardarm had been located on land atop a high pole, I might have gotten used to the height. But out on the ocean, the motion of the ship never stops. The higher I climbed, the more the sensation of roll was magnified, until at the top of the mast it assumed the dimensions of a roller coaster ride. I hung on at the ends of the yardarms while the masts carved great arcs in the sky. With a following sea running, the stern lifted and the arcs were transformed into enormous figure-eights. The combination of rolling and insecure support kept me constantly aware of the

chasm beneath my feet, and kept me from ever feeling relaxed.

Instead of diminishing the experience of being aloft, the danger added to it, making all the sensations more intense. I looked out from my aerial viewpoint, and saw nothing but the clouds, the 360-degree sweep of the horizon, and the ship below. If I leaned forward I could see the square sails terraced beneath me, and far below, I could see the ship's broad, flat bow bludgeoning its way through the waves. Aft, I could see the rear two-thirds of the ship, moving smoothly through the ocean, trailing a veil of foam along the sides and past the

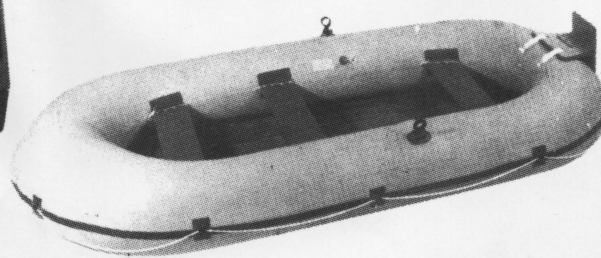
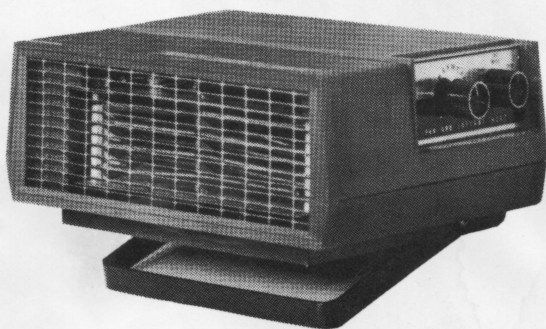
stern. Parallel with my viewpoint were the main mast and the mizzen, with their spread of sails and rigging descending to the deck, where tiny figures moved about, attending to the routines of the vessel.

For me these were timeless moments, ungoverned by clocks, calendars, or centuries. In the rigging I became part of the tradition of the sea, and even now the sensation is strong in my mind. It is a sensation that cannot be enjoyed on any other kind of boat. It was an experience that I came to have by chance, and which will remain with me, I hope, forever. □

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